Have Trump’s anti-DEI orders hit private funders? HHMI halts inclusive science programme

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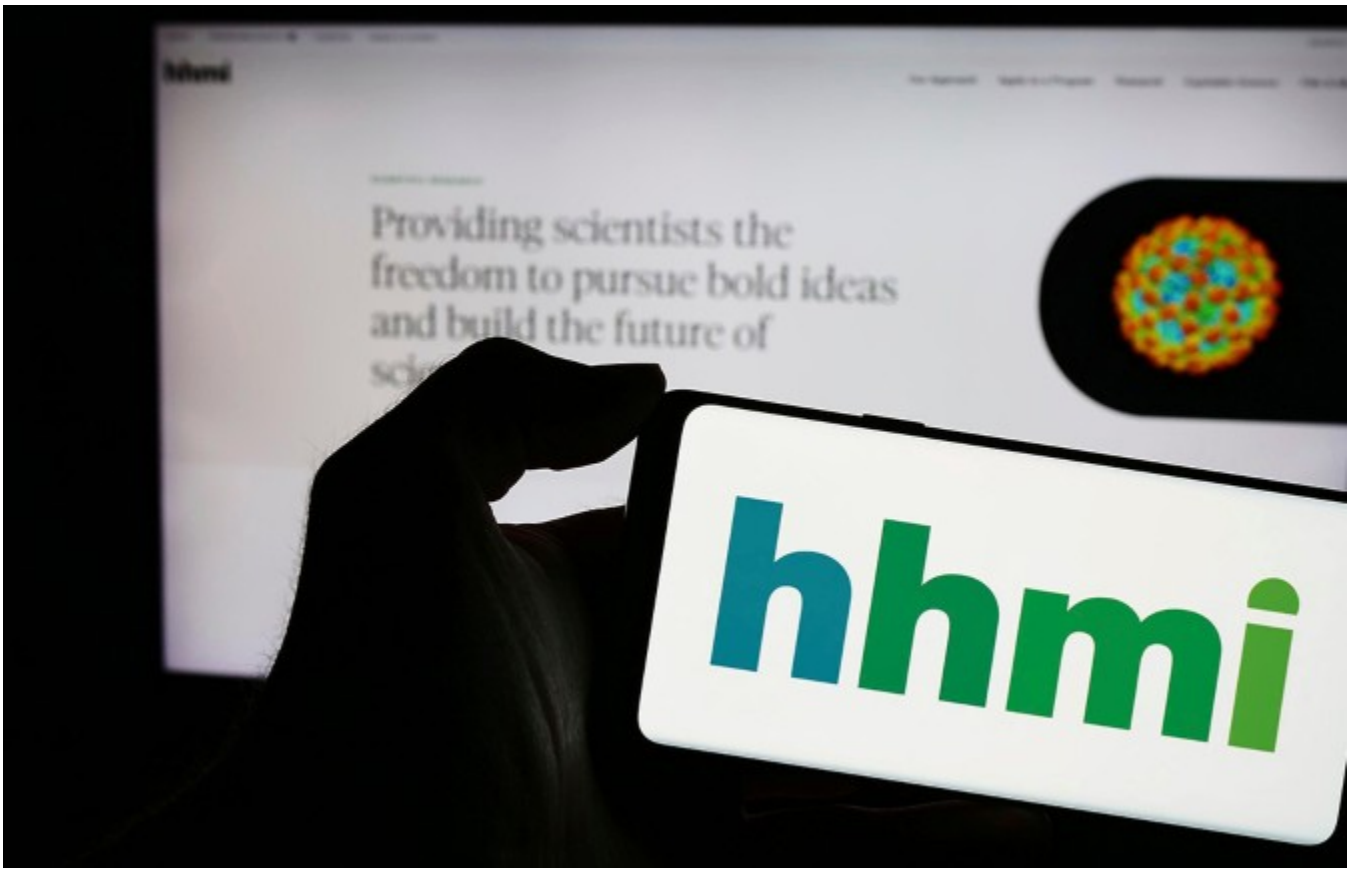

The Howard Hughes Medical Institute, based in Chevy Chase, Maryland, is the second-wealthiest medical-research foundation in the world.Credit: imageBROKER/Alamy

The Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) — one of the world’s largest private funders of basic biomedical research — has abruptly cancelled a US$60-million initiative to boost diversity in university science programmes and scrubbed all mention of the effort from its website.

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In doing so, the funder has terminated grants to 104 US universities approximately midway through the programme's six-year funding cycle, without any explanation. The move has unsettled many scientists, who are reeling after US President Donald Trump issued a stream of executive orders in the past few weeks targeting "illegal" diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies and funding across the country, saying that the policies diminish "the importance of individual merit, aptitude, hard work, and determination when selecting people for jobs and services in key sectors of American society". In response, US science agencies have ordered staff members to strip DEI mentions from government websites and are scrutinizing federal research grants for violations, with an eye towards revising or cancelling them.

That such a massive private funder, which doesn't receive federal funding, is cutting support at such a sensitive time "is so disappointing", says Danielle Beckman, a neuroscientist at the University of California, Davis. "Now is the time that we need private funders to fill the gap that the new administration has left" by threatening public science funding.

A spokesperson for the HHMI, based in Chevy Chase, Maryland, confirmed that the institution terminated the initiative, called Inclusive Excellence 3 (IE3), on 5 February, adding that the HHMI "remains committed to supporting outstanding scientists and talented students training to become scientists" through its other programmes. The spokesperson did not address *Nature*'s queries about why IE3 was cancelled, why HHMI deleted all its webpages referencing the programme or scientists' distress over its termination.

A 'safe haven'?

With a $24-billion endowment, the HHMI is the second-wealthiest medical-research foundation in the world. Its prominent Investigator Program offers each recipient $11 million over a renewable seven-year term to conduct groundbreaking research.

RNA biologist loses disability case against Howard Hughes Medical Institute

Its IE3 initiative grouped its awardee universities into seven 'learning communities' to encourage collaboration on projects. Each community, consisting of about 15 US institutions, received nearly $9 million and was tasked with deciding how and where to allocate that money. For example, one of the communities was working to build more robust peer-mentoring programmes to improve student outcomes.

Although the HHMI did not say why it ended IE3, Trump's 21 January order on DEI might have played a part. The order calls for US agencies to encourage the private sector to end "illegal DEI discrimination". He directed each agency to produce, within four months, a list of up to nine companies, non-profit organizations, "foundations with assets of 500 million dollars or more" or other private institutions for potential civil-compliance investigations.

To understand the importance of IE3, *Nature* reached out to nine researchers listed as a principal investigator on one of the programme's grants. Some did not respond, and the others either declined to comment or requested anonymity because they feared drawing attention to their university in the current political climate.

In the United States, "we know we have a problem retaining STEM [science, technology, engineering and mathematics] students, especially with how COVID interrupted schooling", and this money helped to bring institutions together to address the problem, says one researcher. "All the momentum we had built — gone."

The decision has left scientists in a bind, because it seems that federal funding for research related in any way to DEI will dry up after Trump's crackdown. "There were rumours this would happen to federally funded grants, but many people thought that private foundations might be a safe haven from all that," the same researcher says.

The fact that the HHMI not only ended IE3, but also wiped all traces of it off its website was particularly disheartening, Beckman says. "It's like it never existed." And sometime in the past six months, the HHMI deleted a landing page on which it stated its commitment to DEI and posted demographic data about its grantees and staff members.

Beckman, who is from Brazil and came to the United States in 2017 for a postdoctoral fellowship, is considering leaving the country. She has already had a difficult time finding a faculty position in

infectious-diseases research, and if private funding becomes unreliable as well, the conditions might be too unfavourable for her to stay, she says.

The private-funding landscape

The HHMI also runs other initiatives aimed at diversifying the biomedical workforce, such as its Freeman Hrabowski Scholars programme, which awards investigators up to $8.6 million over ten years. The institution "does not anticipate changes" to these programmes, the spokesperson said.

Exclusive: how NSF is scouring research grants for violations of Trump's orders

Earlier this week, another private organization, the American Society for Microbiology (ASM) in Washington DC, drew some scientists' ire for altering its website to remove pages about Black, female and LGBT scientists. The organization has since restored them, but the controversy demonstrates the reach of Trump's directives, given that the ASM receives some federal funding.

Beyond the HHMI, *Nature* contacted six other large, private US organizations that fund diversity initiatives in the sciences to ask whether they plan to adjust these programmes. "The situation at the federal level is rapidly changing", but the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's commitment to its grantees is not, according to a spokesperson for the organization, based in New York City. The Burroughs Wellcome Fund in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, will "continue to assess the evolving landscape" to advance "science and innovation that benefits everyone", says a spokesperson. The Simons Foundation in New York City continues to support its ongoing grants and programmes, says its president, David Spergel.

The three other organizations — the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative in Redwood City, California, and the Bloomberg Philanthropies and Doris Duke Foundation, both in New York City — did not respond to questions about anticipated changes.

The Science Philanthropy Alliance, a community of 34 science funders that is based in Palo Alto, California, took down a website displaying its DEI statement sometime in the past six months. In its place, there is a statement about "opportunity for all". The organization declined to comment about the change. [*Editor's update, 11 February: since this story was published, the "opportunity for all" statement has also disappeared.*]